



School Foods Standards Consultation

Deadline 12 June 2026

Introduction

The School Food Standards set requirements for the food provided in local authority maintained nurseries, primary and secondary schools and academies, with the goal of ensuring that pupils are eating healthy foods. The current standards have been in place since 2014 and do not reflect the best modern dietary evidence and knowledge. The government has now updated them and is seeking views on the proposed new standards from people or organisations with an interest in school food, including teachers, school managers and governors, nutrition professionals and parents.

The new standards are a significant step forward in supporting pupils to eat plant-based foods, as well as in other areas of health, such as cutting down fat, salt and sugar intake. Unlike the current standards, they do not require schools to serve meat, instead saying that pupils' protein needs can be met through plant-based foods, and in particular pulses. Schools are now free to completely replace meat with pulses on their menus if they choose to. The standards also support plant-based alternatives to dairy products, but do not make providing these compulsory. They also set some restrictions on meat "alternatives".

The new standards should significantly improve the availability of plant-based foods in schools. However, they do not guarantee that the nutritional needs of vegan children will be met. The Vegan Society is therefore responding to the consultation to seek further improvements. Our submission is being written primarily by our registered dietitians and reflects the latest and best evidence on nutrition and the needs of vegan children. This guidance is a simplified and shortened version, containing the key messages but without the detailed evidence. Receiving many submissions with similar messages and arguments will help to give those arguments more weight when the government evaluates the consultation and considers any changes to the guidance.

The consultation

Responding to the consultation requires filling in an online form, which seeks information about the person filling in the form and then goes on to a set of specific questions about the standards. Most have multiple choice options and then a section to provide more information. There are more than 30 questions about the standards themselves - the advice below covers only those questions which are relevant to veganism and plant-based foods. You may, of course, choose to complete other questions if you wish, and/or you can skip any which you don't want to respond to.

You can use our wording or adapt it if you prefer. In particular, if you are a parent or teacher with direct experience of vegan children being unable to access suitable nutritious food or suffering disadvantage compared to other children, providing those specific examples will be very helpful, especially in regard to Q39.

The government's consultation page is [here](#). There are introductory pages which lead you to the actual questionnaire. You do not have to complete it all in one sitting – you can save each page of answers and return to it later.

The deadline for submissions is 11.59pm on the 12 June.

Thank you for responding to the consultation. This is a powerful opportunity to influence children's health and their knowledge and habits around food, and to ensure that vegan pupils get the support and nutrition they deserve. Your contribution will make a difference.

If you have any questions, please contact us at policy@vegansociety.com.

CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

17. To what extent do you agree to the proposed list of permitted drinks in primary schools?

Agree.

Please explain why you answered in this way

The inclusion of non-sweetened, fortified soya and oat drinks is very welcome. These drinks provide nutritional value – especially soya because of its higher protein content. The guidance provided by [the Committee on Toxicology and Scientific Committee on Nutrition](#) in 2025 stated that these alternatives are an acceptable and safe alternative to cow’s milk for primary school-age children.

Provision of these drinks also ensures the needs of vegan children and those who do not drink dairy milks for other reasons are met.

18. To what extent do you agree to the proposed list of permitted drinks in secondary schools?

Agree

Please explain why you answered in this way

Non-sweetened, fortified soya and oat drinks provide nutritional value – especially soya because of its higher protein content. The guidance provided by [the Committee on Toxicology and Scientific Committee on Nutrition](#) in 2025 stated that these alternatives are an acceptable and safe alternative to cow’s milk for children of secondary school age.

Provision of these drinks also ensures the needs of vegan children and those who do not drink dairy milks for other reasons are met.

Q21. To what extent do you agree with the proposed changes to the dairy and plant-based requirements?

Agree

Please explain why you answered in this way

Provision of suitably fortified non-sweetened plant drinks provides nutritional value without some of the risks associated with dairy products, such as a higher intake of saturated fat. However, the standards must be amended so that these drinks *must* be served, as is the case with dairy milks, rather than that they *can* be served, as the current draft states. Children who do not drink dairy milk must always have the option of similar-style drinks containing protein and the identified fortified ingredients.

Not being provided with these drinks puts vegan children at risk of disadvantage in comparison to children who do consume dairy products. (see also Q39). Veganism is protected under the European Convention on Human Rights and is a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010, which protects "religion or belief". Schools under local authority control must also comply with the Public Sector Equality Duty which requires them to take steps to meet the needs of pupils with protected characteristics.

The same requirement for provision of non-dairy alternatives should also apply where any dairy-based desserts such as yoghurts are provided, to make sure children who do not consume dairy milk are getting good sources of calcium at school.

Because of their lower levels of fat and greater environmental sustainability, plant-based options should be provided as the default offering on menus, rather than being positioned as an alternative to dairy milks. Evidence shows that this encourages the consumption of plant-based foods.

The current subsidy of school dairy milk provided by the School Milk Subsidy Scheme disadvantages those who do not drink dairy milks. Equivalent financial support for plant-based milk alternatives should be provided.

23. To what extent do you agree with the new rules restricting the serving of cheese?

Strongly agree

Please explain why you answered in this way

Vegetarian meals should prioritise beans and pulses as protein sources, as they are a good source of fibre and low in fat. They are also more inclusive than meals containing cheese, as they can be suitable for vegan children.

24. To what extent do you agree with the plan to restrict the serving of cheese as a main protein option in secondary schools, in stages?

Strongly agree

Please explain why you answered in this way

Vegetarian meals should prioritise beans and pulses as protein sources, as they are a good source of fibre and low in fat. They are also more inclusive, as they can be suitable for vegan children.

29. To what extent do you agree with the changes being suggested for pulses being included alongside main menu items at least once every week?

Agree

Please explain why you answered in this way

Pulses provide both fibre and protein and have lower environmental footprints than animal-based foods, as well as usually being more inexpensive per portion. However, as things stand in the current draft, they might only be served as part of a non-vegetarian menu as little as once a week.

Currently only 4% of children in the UK get enough fibre. Including pulses more regularly and often on school menus, as well as fruit, vegetables and wholegrains, will help more children to reach their fibre needs. An effective measure is to provide plant-based meals that use pulses as the source of protein as the default option on menus, rather than as an option for vegetarian/vegans or an alternative to meat-based dishes. Evidence indicates that this measure would increase the uptake of plant-based foods and help all children to eat more fibre.

30. To what extent do you agree with the plan to increase pulses in secondary schools in stages?

Strongly agree

31. To what extent do you agree with the changes being suggested for protein in school menus?

Agree

Please explain why you answered in this way

Ending the requirement in the existing standards for meat and dairy products to be provided is very welcome. This provides schools with the option of meeting all protein requirements through the provision of pulses (in addition to other plant-based protein sources such as mycoprotein, tofu and soya mince), including having entirely plant-based menus if they choose and if these otherwise meet the standards.

The standards at present provide no guidance on other minimally processed plant-based protein sources such as tempeh and seitan, which should be explicitly permitted, as is the case with tofu.

The proposals should go further in encouraging the uptake of healthy plant-based dishes. An effective measure is to provide plant-based options as the default on menus, rather than as an option for vegetarian/vegans or an alternative to meat-based dishes. Evidence indicates that this measure will increase the uptake of plant-based foods. For vegan children and others, at least one hot, nutritious plant-based meal should be available every day.

However, the restriction on “vegetarian or plant-based products which are marketed as meat alternatives (manufactured or homemade)” does not have a basis in nutrition, and instead treats foods as unhealthy on the basis of their marketing.

Current evidence is that there is no direct link between ill health and ‘ultra-processed’ plant foods such as burgers and sausages, unlike processed animal meat products which do show an association. Processed, plant-based meat alternatives may have high levels of fat, salt and sugar which are unhealthy, so the standards should ensure the use of “meat alternatives” which have a healthy nutritional profile. Wholefoods such as pulses should be prioritised and be at the centre of main meal provision, but the use of alternatives with healthy nutritional profiles may encourage more children to take up healthy plant-based options.

33. To what extent do you think the proposed changes will improve the nutritional quality of school meals?

To a great extent

39. What concerns, if any, do you have about the potential impact of these proposals on all individuals with protected characteristics?

Veganism is protected under the European Convention on Human Rights and is a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010. Schools under local authority control must also comply with the Public Sector Equality Duty which requires them to take steps to meet the needs of pupils with protected characteristics.

The proposals represent a significant improvement on the previous food standards as the outcome is likely to be greater provision of food suitable for vegans. The standards do not currently, however, ensure that vegan children will be provided with suitably nutritious options every day.

To ensure vegan children's needs are properly taken into account, some changes must be made. Firstly, as noted in the answer to Q21, unsweetened and fortified plant-based milk substitutes should be made compulsory rather than optional. Secondly, wherever dairy-based desserts such as yoghurts are provided, plant-based versions should also be available. Thirdly, at least one nutritious, fully plant-based/vegan-suitable hot meal option should be provided daily.

Separately to, but relevant to the School Food Standards, the current subsidy of dairy milk provided by the School Milk Subsidy Scheme disadvantages vegan children and others who do not drink dairy milks. Equivalent financial support for plant-based milk alternatives should be provided.

40. Do you think the new School Food Standards could have any positive and/or negative effects on the environment?

Plant-based foods have in most circumstances significantly lower environmental footprints than animal-based foods. Substituting meat dishes for plant proteins and in particular pulses is likely to significantly reduce the environmental impacts of schools which do so.

Greater provision and availability of plant-based food will also help to normalise plant-based meals and may encourage children to consume more outside school, having a further positive effect.

41. Do you have any further comments you would like to share with us?

It is important that caterers, chefs and suppliers are fully trained and able to produce cost-effective, healthy, enjoyable plant-based foods, and in particular pulse-based dishes, in order to encourage children to eat them, provide value for money and reduce food wastage. The government should facilitate this skills development through providing platforms and networks for skill sharing.

It is also important that health professionals such as dietitians fully understand the nutritional implications of the more extensive use of plant-based foods and are able to support caterers in developing more plant-based menus.

Because pulses are almost always cheaper than animal-based proteins, increasing the proportion of plant-based foods consumed in schools can also help to reduce catering costs. Savings can be redirected to support educational provision.

Evidence also shows that increased uptake of pulses and vegetables can result from involving children in menu development and running classroom sessions alongside the introduction of new ingredients, so they understand where their food comes from and how it is grown.

-ends-